



Jane Hammond

Back Stage—Secrets of Scene Painting

January 18–April 5, 2002

WHITNEY

Whitney Museum of American Art
at Philip Morris





Back Stage: Secrets of Scene Painting, 2002. Oil on canvas with mixed media, nineteen panels, 142 x 250 in.
(360.7 x 635 cm) overall. Collection of the artist; courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York (installation view)

Backstage at the Memory Theater

Everyone knows that strange, marvelous, fleeting state between sleep and waking, when the mind is beginning to emerge from the realm of dreams into the more obdurate portion of existence we call “reality.” It’s a delicious moment when you can not only recall the manifold happenings of your dreams but also feel as if you comprehend their logic—that oblique, unpredictable narrative structure that, in a few minutes, will be as mysterious and incomprehensible as the script of a lost language.

This in-between state is extremely fragile. A turn of the head or a blink of the eye can be enough to make it vanish, but for as long as it lasts you seem to have been granted access to new realms of understanding. The experience of standing in front of one of Jane Hammond’s thronging, multilayered, icon-rich paintings is not unlike this frontier zone of consciousness. The viewer is confronted with sets of wildly disparate images—Hammond has taken up subjects as diverse as erotic voyeurism and the life of her own grandmother—that seem to be linked by some not quite tangible order. Using brilliant visual rhymes and subtly ordered compositions, she enmeshes her fanciful figures and objects within cohesive, if sometimes bizarre, symbolic tales. Rejecting both the irrational juxtapositions of Surrealism and the chilly disjunctions of postmodernism, Hammond crafts a unique visual syntax that, for all its imaginative leaps, invites our comprehension.

Like every truly original artist, Hammond melds together an unusual set of influences and affinities, in effect creating a tradition for herself. Her artistic DNA includes maverick American painter Alfred Jensen (for his methodical impasto as much as for his crackpot numerology and stripped-down palette), collagist Joseph Cornell (the visual poetry of printed ephemera), Swedish Pop artist Öyvind Fahlström (the recycling of found imagery, densely packed compositions), Mexican allegorist Frida Kahlo (the artist appearing in her own paintings as mistress of ceremonies, a taste for vernacular traditions), and San Francisco painter Jess (labor-intensive image-making, an antiquarian bent).

Even more striking than this unexpected artistic genealogy is the method Hammond established at the beginning of her career. In the mid-1980s, she assembled a group of 276 images and decided that henceforth she would employ only these motifs in her paintings. Each image was assigned a number, and for many years the titles of Hammond’s paintings included unwieldy strings of numerals that referenced the motifs employed in a particular painting. The images were mostly from everyday life, but rarely the everyday life of the present. Then, as now, Hammond’s art relied extensively on her collections of Victorian and Edwardian children’s books, antique volumes on puppetry and magic, charts pertaining to various mystical beliefs, diagrams of obsolete scientific instruments, and all manner of printed ephemera from around the world.

Running parallel to this innovative approach to image and structure is Hammond’s equally individual approach to process. Initially in her rice-paper drawings, and subsequently on many of her paintings,



Sore Models #2, 1994. Oil on canvas with metal leaf, two panels, 88 x 81 in. (223.5 x 205.7 cm) overall.
Collection of Dr. and Mrs. Robert and Lisa Feldman

Hammond used collage and solvent transfers to create image-filled grounds on which she then built her works. She has also been increasingly drawn to irregularly shaped supports. The diptych *Sore Models #2*, for instance, is made in the shape of a pair of unshod feet, and the contours of *Keeping the Orphan* (the work based on her grandmother) delineate the border of the state of Connecticut.

Hammond is also fascinated with literature. The eccentric procedures of French writer Raymond Roussel provided a useful model for Hammond at the start of her career. Later, she continued to draw on literary sources by asking the poet John Ashbery to concoct forty-four titles that she could use for future paintings. In both cases, Hammond turned to literature not for subject matter—almost always a dangerous move for a painter—but as a source of formal constraints to impose on her work.

Hammond's uniqueness is on brilliant display in her most recent large painting, *Back Stage: Secrets of Scene Painting*. The immediate precedent for this multipanel work is a smaller painting titled *The Mush Stage*. Both pictures draw on the realm of theater for their prevailing motifs. *The Mush Stage* features a shallow stage delineated by some roughly sketched floorboards. Puppetry-related images share this cramped stage with the disembodied heads of Igor Stravinsky and Mao Tse-tung. Behind them hang painted backdrops, with a puppeteer's hand poking over the top of one. In the upper left corner is a somewhat macabre image of the artist herself as a rubber mask pinned upside down to the wall. Her mouth, open as if to sing, ties into the fragments of musical notation near the bottom of the painting.

For *Back Stage: Secrets of Scene Painting*, Hammond greatly expands her scale of composition and range of imagery. Here there are two stages flanking each other like the pages of an open book. At the back of each stage hang layers of painted backdrops (an English country lane, a whaling

scene, a colonnaded interior, a jungle), setting up a vertiginous play of illusion and allusion. Adding to the feeling that many scenes are taking place at the same time, models and diagrams of other theaters and stages are scattered around the perimeter of the painting. Between the two stages is an array of masks and puppet parts, presumably waiting to be put to theatrical use. Included in this repository are the instantly recognizable visages of Abraham Lincoln, Andy Warhol, and Albert Einstein, among others, challenging one to imagine the madcap production that might place this unlikely group aboard a whaling ship.



Back Stage: Secrets of Scene Painting, 2002
(installation detail)

Hammond prepared for this painting by perusing antique volumes with titles such as *Secrets of Scene Painting and Stage Effects* and *How to Put on an Amateur Circus*, as well as nineteenth-century English prints designed to be used as backdrops in puppet theaters. She delved enthusiastically into this realm of bygone home entertainment—the incredible variety of amateur theatricals that families relied on before the advent of film, radio, and television. (Painting, let us not forget, was another of those popular activities that people pursued more widely before the rise of mass media.) As she began to focus on the idea of making a behind-the-scenes theater painting, Hammond noticed a striking parallel with her own artistic practice in which some components of her lexicon are visible in a given work while many others remain unseen, waiting in the wings.

Theatrical architecture has long obsessed Hammond. Her first “room paintings,” in which figures and objects were situated within architectural spaces rather than against patterned grounds, were based on theaters and stage sets. It would be a mistake, however, to think only in terms of staged productions when considering the theatrical frame of Hammond’s paintings. In many ways, her fictive stages have more to do with the “memory theaters” of the Renaissance than they do with actual theaters of any era.

As the historian Frances A. Yates explains in her groundbreaking 1966 book *The Art of Memory*, memory theaters, which arose from the mnemonic systems that played such a large role in classical and medieval rhetoric, used the architecture of the theater to assist in mnemonic representations of human knowledge. Philosophers, theologians, and political orators had known for centuries that it was easier to retrieve large amounts of material from their minds if they imagined multi-chambered buildings and mentally furnished each room with objects that could be associated with the facts they wanted to recall. Then, an itinerant sixteenth-century Italian savant named Giulio Camillo built a wooden theaterlike structure large enough for one or two people to enter. Inside, an elaborate system of images and texts was used to represent nothing less than the order of the universe, drawing on the Cabala, the signs of the zodiac, the writings of Cicero, and Hermetic philosophy. In the early seventeenth century, the English divine and scholar Robert Fludd also drew on the Hermetic Cabalistic traditions of the Renaissance, but rather than create a physical space he preferred to let his theater remain a mental construct. (Although it never attained more than theoretical status, Fludd’s theater was based on a real building—according to Yates, Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre.)

There are a number of compelling reasons for thinking of Hammond’s paintings as memory theaters. Like Camillo and Fludd, Hammond is a passionate systematizer, obsessively cataloguing, classifying, and ordering the entries in her image encyclopedia. She also shares their attraction to esoteric beliefs, filling her paintings with references to palmistry, phrenology, and astrology. Underlying these parallels are the striking structural resemblances: Camillo, Fludd, and Hammond all use theaterlike spaces as repositories for representative, talismanic images.

Also relevant is Hammond’s inexhaustible hunger for salvaging the visual ephemera of past epochs. But if she proposes painting as a memory theater, her motive is not simply to archive data. By working with a fixed number of found images, Hammond reminds us of the infinite human capacity for generating meaning; her work is a combinatorial celebration of visual myth-making. Toward the end of *The Art of Memory*, Yates observes that Camillo “formed a Memory Theater in which all knowledge was to be synthesized through images.” In Hammond’s methodical, dreamlike art, an ambition no less compelling seems to be at work.

—Raphael Rubinstein

Jane Hammond

Born in Bridgeport, Connecticut, 1950
Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley,
Massachusetts (BA, 1972)
University of Wisconsin–Madison (MFA, 1977)
Lives and works in New York City

Selected One-Artist Exhibitions

1989 Exit Art, New York

1992 Heland Wetterling Gallery, Stockholm

1993 Cincinnati Art Museum

1994 Orlando Museum of Art (traveled)

1995 Ruth Bloom Gallery, Santa Monica,
California

1996 *New paintings and drawings*, Galerie
Barbara Farber, Amsterdam

1997 Luhring Augustine, New York

1998 *Works on Paper*, Zolla/Lieberman Gallery,
Chicago

1999 *Game Show*, Lemberg Gallery, Birmingham,
Michigan
Galería Senda, Barcelona

2000 *Recent Paintings and Drawings*, Greg Kucera
Gallery, Seattle

2001 *The John Ashbery Collaboration, 1993–2001*,
Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art
(traveling)
From Avatar to Zed, Galerie Lelong, New York



Selected Group Exhibitions

1998 *Knowing Children*, David Beitzel Gallery,
New York

*Secret Victorians: Contemporary Artists and a
19th-Century Vision*, Hayward Gallery,
London (traveled)

Preserving the Past, Securing the Future,
The National Museum of Women in the
Arts, Washington, D.C.

1999 *The Broad Spectrum: Color on Paper, Past and
Present*, The Art Institute of Chicago

*Faster Than a Speeding Bullet: Superheroes in
Contemporary Art*, Cleveland Center for
Contemporary Art

Domestic Pleasures, Galerie Lelong, New York

*A Sense of Risk: Art of the Nineties from the
Robert J. Shiffler Foundation*, Miami

University Art Museum, Oxford, Ohio

2000 *The End: An Independent Vision of Contemporary
Culture, 1982–2000*, Exit Art, New York

1000 + 1 Nacht, Landesgalerie, Linz, Austria

*Reconstructions: The Imprint of Nature/The Impact
of Science*, Sidney Mishkin Gallery, Baruch
College, The City University of New York

*The Likeness of Being: Contemporary Self Portraits
by 60 Women*, DC Moore Gallery, New York

Picturing the Modern Amazon, New Museum of
Contemporary Art, New York

Contemporary Narratives in American Prints,
Whitney Museum of American Art at
Champion, Stamford, Connecticut

2001 *Digital: Printmaking Now*, Brooklyn Museum
of Art, New York

Kinds of Drawing, Herter Art Gallery,
University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Din Art 4, Museum für Kommunikation,
Frankfurt

Keeping the Orphan, 1997. Oil on canvas with mixed media,
three panels, 114 x 137 in. (289.6 x 348 cm) overall. Private collection

WHITNEY

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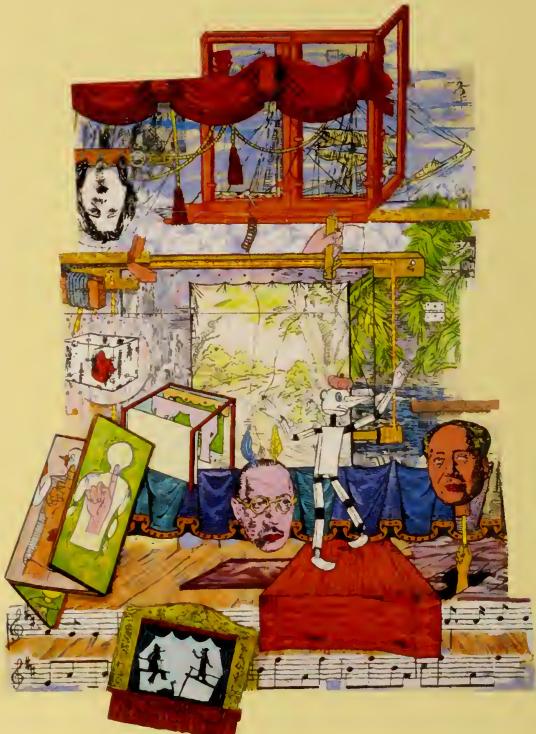
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at Philip Morris**
120 Park Avenue at 42nd Street
New York, NY 10017

ABOVE: *The Mush Stage*, 2001. Oil on canvas with mixed media, 104 x 74 in. (264.2 x 188 cm). Collection of Sharon and Thurston Twigg-Smith

COVER: *Back Stage: Secrets of Scene Painting*, 2002 (installation detail)

All photographs by Peter Muscato except *The Mush Stage* by Zindman-Fremont.